

Alternative's still alive with Live

by Brad Kane
The Collegian

What happened to alternative? *Spin* magazine says it's dead, a victim of that all encompassing beast called Top 40.

Look at the charts for any reassurance - Nirvana is in the top-20 with a bullet, R.E.M. went all-world with "Out of Time" last year, U2 visited number one again recently and the list goes on.

This is but a primer of what has been expected for some time, the incorporation of alternative into the mainstream.

Scary? If you're a diehard follower of the underground music scene - yes it could strike fear into your heart. But alas, a beacon has appeared on the horizon, and it is Live, four 20-year-olds from York, PA who have salvaged some familiar alternative sounds, rehashing them into a conglomeration that might not yet be radio-ready.

Yes, this could be at least a partial segue back into the alternative world, a refreshing one

heard before, but something here is indeed different - it's in the way the songs are presented.

Instead of being pretentious and preachy (with probably the exception of "You Are the World"), Kowalczyk takes the listener into his own personal world of demons with a purpose - that of finding answers, not just asking questions.

This objective Kowalczyk achieves. With help from bassist Patrick Dahlheimer's funky lines, guitarist Chad Taylor's variation of styles and drummer Chad Gracey's angry clubbing, Kowalczyk suddenly becomes more accessible than Bono in his younger days: Michael Stipe currently.

On "Pain Lies on the Riverside," Kowalczyk sings "I've got to learn to live until no end / But first I must learn to swim all over again."

On the brilliant first single "Operation Spirit (The Tyranny of Tradition)," he asks "Did you let it go? / Let's get it back / Let's get it back together."

On "The Beauty of Gray" he

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at that.

The group's striking debut, *Mental Jewelry*, produced by Talking Heads' guitarist Jerry Harrison, is chock-full of politically attuned lyrics (a la many alternative bands) with a sound that, on the surface, seems simple but underneath is a mix of styles.

With some slap-happy funk bass and washes of reverberating guitar, buoyed by singer Edward Kowalczyk's nasal-toned but soulful voice, the group sounds like the Red Hot Chili Peppers meet U2 while sitting on Otis Redding's dock of the bay with a cold.

Lyrical, Live does well, but if *Mental Jewelry* had come out four or five years ago, its abundance of political gloom and doom rhetoric may not have washed well.

But with, once again, that assimilation of normally opinionated bands into the mainstream (U2, R.E.M., PiL, Ned's Atomic Dustbin, Big Audio Dynamite II, The Alarm), politically inspired bands are few and far between. Therefore, Live is a much needed deterrent from all of the nonsense music circulating out there today.

Not that all of their ideas are original, though. Racial harmony ("The Beauty of Gray"), war ("Take My Anthem"), environmental problems ("Mother Earth is a Vicious Crowd") and pleas for peace ("10,000 Years") are addressed on *Mental Jewelry*. For the most part, it's nothing that hasn't been

declares "This is not a black and white world / To be alive I say that the colors must swirl / And I believe that maybe today / We will all get to appreciate / The beauty of gray." And this, my friends, is just from the first three songs on the album.

Everywhere on *Mental Jewelry* are located these jewels for the mind - little snippets of wisdom that stick with the listener long after the album has been heard.

Maybe Kowalczyk's delivery is responsible for this. Maybe the understated tone of the music is to be held due. Only on "Good Pain" does Live kick in the doors with a hard, steady beat, but even this works well.

Whatever the formula is, Kowalczyk undoubtedly has become a quintessential frontman, a focal point from where the music can fan out around him, improving upon itself, enlightening all that hear.

Enlightenment is what Live is all about - not mere telling of tales with open endings. In a musical wasteland of ambiguities with songwriters who cover their defects by saying that their work is to be left open to interpretation by the listener, Live stands in direct opposition to all of that - presenting concrete images with music that echoes the rise and fall of emotions present.

Live is a genuine delight. Most likely, popular radio won't pick up on the foursome for a while yet, if at all, but that's okay. Indeed, alternative may just be alive and well.

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